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SUBJECT: "WE EAT EVERYTHING ON FOUR LEGS EXCEPT THE TABLE":
VIETNAM'S CONSUMPTION OF WILD ANIMAL PRODUCTS

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11. (U) Summary: Domestic consumption and regional exports of wild animal products threaten Vietnam's once-abundant wildlife. Vietnamese craving for wild meat and animal-based traditional medicines seemingly trump conservation concerns. Lack of high-level political will hamstringing Government of Vietnam (GVN) enforcement of wildlife protection laws, but increasingly strong NGO-funded public education campaigns, and a bureaucratic framework of protection that's already in place, could help turn the tide. All agree that changing the behavior of Vietnamese consumers is key. Wildlife advocates highlight some successes and continue their efforts to protect endangered animals. End Summary.

Illegal Wildlife Trade Continues to Boom

12. (SBU) Vietnam is home to roughly 10 percent of the world's species, several of which are only found in Vietnam. However, many protected animals end up illegally trafficked for human consumption. GVN and NGO experts agree that wildlife populations continue to dwindle rapidly due to illegal trade and consumption. One local NGO estimates 3,000 tons of wildlife are traded in Vietnam every year in transactions valued at roughly USD 66.5 million annually, though other analysts claim the figures actually are much higher. Some experts believe that approximately half of illegally traded animals in Vietnam are exported to China and other ASEAN countries. Scott Robertson, program coordinator for the Vietnam Hunting & Wildlife Trade Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society, notes that Vietnam is extremely well-integrated into the global wildlife trade and serves as a transfer point for animals smuggled from elsewhere in Asia to China and beyond. However, domestic demand takes an increasing proportion of the total. GVN animal protection authorities acknowledge that demand continues to increase, even as supply seemingly decreases. Excess demand boosts prices, which create additional incentives for wildlife trafficking. Little is known about wildlife smuggling networks, but the Forest Protection Department (FPD), tasked with tracking illegal wildlife, believes the networks are well-organized and involve large sums of money. Anecdotal evidence links some smugglers to cross-border drug and counterfeit trading.

Vietnam's Version of PETA: People Eating Tasty Animals

13. (SBU) Vietnamese typically use wild animal products for food, traditional medicines and ornamental goods, with government officials among the largest consumers of wildlife products. Vietnamese take pride in their culinary adventurousness, and a

recent survey by environmental NGO TRAFFIC Southeast Asia showed that nearly half of Hanoi residents use wild animal products, mostly for food and in medicines. Malayan sun bears, pangolins, turtles, snakes, lizards, macaques, langurs, leopard cat, tigers, porcupines, wild pigs, civets, birds, and deer are among the many protected or endangered animals recently found bound for Vietnamese tables or tonics. Many Vietnamese restaurants feature wild meats and wines, even though Vietnamese law prohibits such sales. Demand for traditional medicines using ingredients derived from wildlife and for exotic pets increases as Vietnam gets wealthier. TRAFFIC Vietnam Coordinator Sulma Warne noted that western medicines, such as Viagra, have not replaced the demand for traditional medicines, which many Vietnamese see as status symbols and indications of prosperity regardless of efficacy.

Increased Awareness Not Translated Into Changed Attitudes

14. (U) Growing environmental awareness has had little effect on wildlife consumption habits. Increasing prosperity, better access to information, public advocacy campaigns by conservation NGOs, and the impacts of industrialization have led some Vietnamese to demand action on environmental issues, such as pollution. Additionally, TRAFFIC found that many Vietnamese generally believed in protecting wildlife. However, few people knew of specific laws on wildlife protection and many were unaware of the status of some of the most heavily consumed animals. Vietnamese also fail to see any link between wild animal products and diseases, despite the recent outbreaks of avian flu and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

Vietnam Has Necessary Laws to Protect Wildlife

15. (U) Wildlife conservation NGOs, such as TRAFFIC and Education for Nature Vietnam (ENV), acknowledge that the GVN has passed important laws and regulations to protect wild animals. Vietnam

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became a member of CITES in 1994 and domestic law requires permits to import and export threatened wildlife. FPD's Vietnam Conservation Fund Manager Mr. Do Quang Tung highlights broad GVN conservation strategies exist within the National Action Plan to Strengthen Control of Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora 2010 (adopted in 2004), the Protective Area Management Strategy 2010 and the Biodiversity Action Plan 2020 (just approved by GVN in May 2007). On March 30, 2006, the GVN issued Decree No. 32 to tighten control over management of rare and endangered plant and animal species. This decree limits transport without a license and forbids exploitation of endangered flora, illegal hunting, raising, slaughtering, transporting, advertising, exporting, and importing precious and endangered forest animals. Article 190 of the Penal Code of Vietnam punishes those involved in the illegal wildlife trade with up to 7 years in prison and a fine of up to 50 million dong (approximately USD 3,000). A new inter-agency circular (No. 19), was issued on March 8, 2007 by MARD outlining how to apply the Criminal Code to violations of forest protection and management laws.

Limited Enforcement, Limited Effect

16. (SBU) GVN enforcement efforts are inconsistent, though ENV and TRAFFIC note some improvements over the past two years due to NGO pressure and increasing (but not yet widespread) public participation. ENV has documented 154 GVN seizures of illegally traded wildlife since January 2005. However, even with stronger efforts, authorities apprehend only about 3 percent of illegally traded animals and many working level officials have little familiarity with their duties and responsibilities. FPD's Tung credited better resource management for some successes in preventing wildlife exploitation, but admitted that the decrease in Vietnam's natural resources also has led to fewer animals to exploit.

17. (SBU) The FPD, under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, has primary (but not exclusive) responsibility for the

protection of Vietnamese flora and fauna. FPD has 61 provincial offices and over 10,000 staff members who administer over 100 special use forests throughout the country, including all important ecosystems. FPD coordinates with many of the other entities with wildlife protection responsibilities, including local police forces, the economic and environmental police departments, police Special Forces, customs officials, and border guards. While FPD investigates wildlife crimes, it must work with police forces to make arrests, some of which, including the newly formed environmental police department, do not view wildlife crimes as widespread or particularly important. On February 9, 2007, the head of the national FPD established a new mobile crimes unit responsible for inspecting, monitoring, and preventing wildlife crimes and implementing actions to combat corruption relating to the above. Conservation NGOs find this new unit particularly trustworthy, as it often acts independently to prevent local authorities from tipping off smuggling rings. For example, ENV staff claimed that the new mobile unit led a recent operation in Hanoi that netted the carcasses of 4 tigers and body parts from 9 bears, without informing local police forces (which took credit in the Hanoi press) or the local FPD office.

18. (SBU) Despite some progress, Vietnam's enforcement efforts cannot succeed without top-level political support. Instead, conservation NGOs state that the GVN maintains a pro-use policy that actually encourages the wildlife trade. Many GVN officials believe that extensive animal farms negate the need to protect wild animals. ENV cited a recent incident in which high-level officials allowed the "war hero" owner of 19 tigers smuggled from Cambodia to keep the tigers in captivity for breeding despite clear violations of CITES and Vietnamese law. When forest rangers do attempt to enforce the law, they face many challenges, from a lack of resources and an insufficient legal framework to deal with offenders to the very real possibility of being shot in the line of duty. Ambiguous laws containing many loopholes, when combined with prosecutors unfamiliar with the statutes, lead to fewer prosecutions. Courts have little experience with wildlife cases and treat them like ordinary economic violations, such as theft of a motorbike, resulting in small fines with little impact. Vietnamese law currently permits the re-sale of confiscated wildlife -- which occurs in almost half of seizures -- significantly limiting the deterrent impact of such seizures and keeping the market well stocked with wild animal products. Many violators have high-level connections, which cause enforcement authorities to shy away from investigations.

Real Men Don't Need Bear Bile: NGO Campaigns

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19. (U) Local and international NGOs continue to educate Vietnamese about the need to protect wildlife, while advocating for increased enforcement. ENV created television and newspaper public service announcements featuring celebrities to promote wildlife protection and stigmatize consumption of wild animal products. TRAFFIC's survey of public attitudes towards wildlife consumption will allow it to better focus its advocacy campaigns and TRAFFIC has assisted the GVN with CITES implementation and capacity building. ENV created a wildlife crimes monitoring unit (complete with a 1-800 line for citizens to report potential violations, which has received over 700 tips in the past two years) that investigates allegations of illegal wildlife trade and forwards evidence to enforcement authorities. ENV also provides monthly crime bulletins for Provincial People's Committees so that the Committees can track enforcement efforts.

Comment

110. (U) Vietnamese environmentalists worry about a future of silent forests -- flora with no fauna -- which in a country with such a huge rich endowment of wildlife, particularly newly discovered species, would be a tremendous loss. However, Vietnam already has many of the tools it needs to protect these resources. Additionally, USAID biodiversity conservation programs support NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund and Winrock International to build

GVN environmental protection capacity and strengthen public awareness at local levels. To get the most from these efforts, we will continue to urge our GVN contacts to show the necessary determination to enforce Vietnamese laws and to act forcefully to deter illegal conduct. We will also support our Washington counterparts in their efforts to make these points in multilateral fora. Wildlife hunting will likely remain a leading driver of biodiversity loss in Vietnam until the consumption of forest-meat specialties and traditional medicines become politically and socially intolerable.

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